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VIENNA

Bulgaria said today it has set up a committee to defend one of its citizens against Italian charges of involvement in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul in 1981.

"The Bulgarian public has constituted a National Committee in Defense of Sergei Antonov," the official BTA news agency said in a report received here.

"The fate of the innocent Bulgarian national, indicted and arraigned on charges of complicity in staging the assassination attempt against the Pope in 1981, has found a broad response in our country," BTA said.

Antonov, a Bulgarian national airline employee working in Italy at the time, is to be tried in Rome for plotting with other Bulgarians and Turkish gunman Ali Agca to kill the Pope.

Bulgarian media accuse the C.I.A. of rigging the affair to discredit the communist country.

BTA said the defense committee is chaired by Boris Spassov, President of the Bulgarian Lawyers Union, and that many other prominent Bulgarian personalities figure among its members. It did not say what action the committee planned.